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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA: GOVERNMENT SHOWS DECLINE IN NEW DISPLACEMENTS,
LAUNCHES NEW ASSISTANCE STRATEGY

REF: BOGOTA 1552

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) The Colombian Government's (GOC) national registry of internally displaced persons (IDPs) shows a 10% decline in displacements in 2008. Social Action (Accion Social), the GOC's development agency charged with IDP assistance coordination, has registered only 86,397 new displacements through September of this year, refusing nearly 40% of displacement declarations as illegitimate. The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) reported similar trends in its assistance programs. However, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and a local human rights group point out that the GOC's figures are preliminary and will continue to climb due to the lag in persons coming forward to register. To address a court decision determining that the GOC's response to IDPs remains unconstitutional, the government has launched a new strategy based on distributing cash during the initial emergency assistance phase, contracting directly with local operators to implement activities, and channeling IDPs into other government assistance programs. The GOC budgeted a hefty \$500 million for IDP programs in 2010, but it is not certain that it can actually spend that much money this year. END SUMMARY.

NEW DISPLACEMENTS ON THE DECLINE

¶2. (U) The GOC's national IDP registry shows a 10% decline in displacements with 294,138 new IDPs in 2008 compared with 325,031 persons displaced in 2007. Armando Escobar, a senior policy adviser for Accion Social, told the Embassy's Refugee Coordinator and USAID IDP Office Director on August 27 that the government has refused nearly 40% of IDP declarations in 2009, many cases due to fraud. For example, many refused applicants are deemed to be economic migrants or unqualified individuals looking to take advantage of the government assistance. Additionally, the government announced in April that it had detected a "mafia" of lawyers and others charging individuals \$20-\$130 to help them file

bogus displacement claims to access assistance.

13. (SBU) Escobar added that the growth in cumulative IDP registrations in the past year (404,152 registrations in 2008 for a total of 3.2 million IDPs included in the GOC's national registry) was a result of a 2008 Administrative Court (Consejo de Estado) order requiring the government to include displacements from all previous years. Under the previous system, an IDP only had one calendar year from displacement to register with the government. According to Accion Social, only 86,397 of the 223,962 (40%) IDPs registered from January to September 2009 were actually displaced in this year and 40,552 (21%) were from displacements that occurred in 2000 and earlier.

14. (U) Martin Bissig, the humanitarian assistance coordinator for ICRC Colombia, told us on September 16 that ICRC has refused approximately half of IDP applicants seeking assistance in 2009 for reasons similar to those cited by Accion Social (para 2). Bissig attributed this to improved verification procedures, but added that the amount of displacement in the country remains a concern with an average of nearly 300,000 new displacements included in the government's registry in each of the past four years. As a result, ICRC will likely assist fewer than the planned 70,000 beneficiaries

based on current trends in 2009.

NOT THE FINAL NUMBERS

15. (U) Roberto Mignone, the deputy representative for UNHCR Colombia, told us on August 26 that the GOC's statistics showing declining displacements are premature. IDPs from 2008 continue to register and there have been significant displacement events in recent months, so 2008 and 2009 figures will continue to climb. He added that under-registration remains a problem given many IDPs cannot or do not register with the government due to fear of retaliation from illegal armed actors or lack of access to the registration system.

16. (U) In an October 13 press release, a local human rights group, the Observatory for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), reported that at least 3,000 persons had been displaced in the previous five days. CODHES also noted that approximately 900 persons in the Pacific Coast area of the department of Narino had fled confrontations between the Colombian Military and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) since September 3. Marco Romero, the president of CODHES, told us on August 27 that the government's registry does not accurately reflect the true scope of the displacement problem, and that Accion Social arbitrarily refuses many cases. He estimated the GOC under-registers approximately 30% of displacements.

17. (U) CODHES issued a report in April that said displacements had risen nearly 25% in 2008 with an estimated 380,863 new IDPs, which was comparable to the peak of displacement in 2002 (reftel). However, CODHES has a broader definition of displacement than the GOC that includes IDPs who have migrated in response to drug eradication efforts, as well as IDPs who may have already registered with the GOC and have been displaced a second or more times. CODHES estimates displacements based on information obtained from the Catholic Church, ICRC, the media, civil society, and some field work.

AN UNCONSTITUTIONAL STATE OF AFFAIRS

¶8. (U) Despite the decline in its statistics, the GOC continues to face challenges in providing effective assistance to IDPs. In January 2009, the Constitutional Court found that the "unconstitutional state of affairs" in the government's response -- originally declared in 2004 -- persisted and ordered the government to reformulate its programs and policies. The Court also ordered the government to implement specific protection and assistance programs for displaced indigenous, Afro-Colombians, and disabled persons (a previous 2008 order provided this right for displaced women and children). To lift the unconstitutional state, the government must demonstrate that assistance programs guarantee the effective "enjoyment of rights" of IDPs as measured against 40 Court-mandated rights across the categories of minimal existence, socio-economic stabilization, protection, and reparation.

ACCION SOCIAL'S NEW IDP STRATEGY

¶9. (U) Accion Social's Escobar told us that the GOC started a new strategy in July that will address the immense needs of IDPs and the Court's concerns. The new IDP strategy distributes cash during the 90-day emergency assistance phase, instead of providing food aid, household kits, psychosocial attention, and income generation assistance directly to IDPs in an integrated assistance package according to the old strategy. An IDP family of three to five persons in a large city (more than 1 million habitants) will receive approximately \$210 per month for 90 days to purchase food, housing, household items, and other necessities. The amount is slightly less for IDPs in rural areas and smaller cities and towns. (Note: The national minimum wage is approximately \$250 per month.) Additional emergency assistance beyond 90 days may be provided based on a needs assessment. The goal is to provide assistance in a quicker, more cost effective manner, and to fully integrate IDP assistance into the government's larger strategy to address poverty and other vulnerable populations.

¶10. (U) Under the new strategy, the government has contracted directly with local operators to provide assistance such as income generation activities to IDPs. Accion Social allowed agreements with its two primary international implementing partners, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and CHF International, to expire in February. Accion Social determined that it could gain considerable savings by contracting directly with local operators already implementing these activities. Since July, Accion Social has awarded \$50 million in contracts to local operators, with plans for more awards later this year.

¶11. (U) Escobar explained that under the new strategy, once an IDP is registered and receives emergency cash assistance, Accion Social assesses the needs of the IDP and makes a referral to other government programs for vulnerable populations, such as "Red Juntos" (an extreme poverty reduction program), "Familias en Accion" (a social assistance program for vulnerable families with children), and job training with the national training service or other providers. Accion Social also plans to develop a new program targeting vulnerable women and to provide other "differentiated" assistance programs targeting other vulnerable groups, such as indigenous and Afro-Colombian IDPs. The new strategy provides accompaniment to IDPs for five years.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE 3.2 MILLION DETAILS

¶12. (U) A major challenge for the new strategy is the size of the GOC's IDP registry. More than 3.2 million IDPs have been registered to date, including 294,138 new displacements in 2008. Accion Social has to go back and assess their needs, while still managing new registrations. Escobar estimates that approximately 700,000 family groups are in the government's registry, out of which 400,000 households can actually be located. Escobar hopes to have the 400,000 family units assessed by December, and to start referring them into other GOC programs.

¶13. (SBU) Escobar estimates that, by the end of five years of assistance, at least half of IDPs will be "enjoying their full rights" as defined by the Court. A 2008 survey carried out by the

Commission for the Observation of Public Policy on Internal Displacement (a Constitutional Court-mandated civil society group formed to provide research and data on the IDP situation) found that while 84% of IDPs were receiving some assistance, only 1% were enjoying all of their rights. Accion Social and other government agencies are due to provide an update on progress to the Court on October 30, and then again in July 2010.

A BUDGET TO MATCH THE CHALLENGE

¶14. (SBU) The GOC announced it will budget approximately \$500 million for IDP programs in 2010. This is an eight-fold increase over the IDP budget in 2003 -- and a tripling of the budget over the past four years. However, now that that Accion Social has ended the IDP emergency assistance and income generation contracts with its two primary international implementing partners and contracted directly with local operators, it is not certain they will have the capacity to actually program all of the budget this year.

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